

John Rolfe, a prominent settler who was usually willing to put as good a face on affairs as possible, could not help taking away with the left hand the praises he bestowed with the right. "Wee found the Colony (God be thanked) in good estate," he wrote home hopefully, "however in buildings, fortifications, and of boats, much ruyned and greate want." All in all, it was not much of a progress report after ten years.

In England, Sir Edwin Sandys was one of the adventurers who watched with distress as the company's efforts came to naught. Sandys lacked the financial means of bigger investors such as Thomas Smith, who had often presided as the company's treasurer. But Sandys's limited resources were precisely the point. Smith and the other big investors considered the Virginia enterprise just one venture among many: the East India Company, trading in the Levant, and the Muscovy Company. If Virginia did not pay immediate dividends, they could afford to wait. Sandys and his followers, with less capital and less margin for error, pressed for immediate reform. By 1618 Smith had agreed to introduce significant changes into the colony's organization; the following year Sandys was elected treasurer of the company. With real power in his hands for the first time, he set out to reconstruct the failing colony from the bottom up.

BLUEPRINT FOR A VIRGINIA UTOPIA

Sandys knew that if his schemes for reform were to succeed, he would have to attract both new investors to the company and new settlers to the colony. Yet the Virginia Company was deeply in debt, and the colony was literally falling apart. In order to entice both settlers and investors, Sandys offered the only commodity the company possessed in abundance—land.

In the first years of the colony, Virginia land had remained company land. Settlers who worked it might own shares in the company, but even so, they did not profit directly from their labor, because all proceeds went into the treasury to be divided only if there were any profits. There never were. In 1617 the company formally changed its policy. Old Planters, those settlers who had arrived in Virginia before the spring of 1616, were each granted 100 acres of land. Freeman received their allotment immediately, while those settlers who were still company servants received their land when their terms of service expired.

Sandys lured new investors with the promise of property too. For every share they purchased, the company granted them 100 acres. More important, Sandys encouraged immigration to the colony by giving investors additional land if they would pay the ship passage of tenant laborers. For every new tenant imported to Virginia, the investor received 50 additional acres. Such land grants were known as "headrights" because the land was apportioned per each "head" imported. Of course, if Old Planters wished to invest in the company, they too would receive 100 acres plus additional 50-acre headrights for every tenant whose passage they paid. Such incentives, Sandys believed, would attract needed funds to the company while also promoting immigration.

And so private property came to Virginia. This tactic was the much-heralded event that every schoolchild is called upon to recite as the salvation of the colony. "When our people were fed out of the common store and labored jointly together, glad was he could slip away from his labour, or slumber over his taske," noted one settler. But "now for themselves they will doe in a day" what before they "would hardly take so much true paines in a weeke." It is important to understand, however, that the company still had its own common land and stock from which it hoped to profit. Thus a company shareholder had the prospect of making money in two ways: from any goods marketed by company servants working company lands, or directly from his newly granted private lands, also known as "particular plantations."

Sandys's administration provided still other openings for private investment. By 1616 the company had already granted certain merchants a four-year monopoly on providing supplies for the colony. The "magazine," as it was called, sent supply ships to Virginia, where its agent, a man known as the "cape merchant," sold the goods in return for produce. In 1620 the company removed the magazine's monopoly and allowed other investors to send over supply ships.

Sandys and his friends also worked to make the colony a more pleasant place to live. Instead of being governed by martial law, as the colony had since 1609, the company instructed the new governor, George Yeardly, to create an assembly with the power to make laws. The laws would be binding so long as the company later approved them. Inhabitants of the various company settlements and the particular plantations were to choose two members each as their burgesses, or representatives. When the assembly convened in 1619 it became the first representative body in the English colonies.

Historians have emphasized the significance of this first step in the evolution of American democracy, and significant it was. But the colony's settlers may have considered it equally important that the company had figured out a way to avoid saddling them with high taxes to pay for their government. Once again, the answer was land, which the company used to pay officials' salaries. Thus the governor received a parcel of 3,000 acres plus 100 tenants to work it, the treasurer of the colony received 1,500 acres and 50 tenants, and so on. Everybody won, or so it seemed. The officers got their salaries without having to "prey upon the people"; the settlers were relieved "of all taxes and public burthens as much as may be"; and the sharecropping tenants, after splitting the profits with company officials for seven years, got to keep the land they worked. If the company carried out its policy, John Rolfe observed enthusiastically, "then we may truly say in Virginia, we are the most happy people in the world."

In 1619, with the reforms in place and Sandys in the treasurer's seat, the company moved into high gear. New investors sent scores of tenants over to work the particular plantations; the company sent servants to tend officers' lands; and lotteries throughout England provided income to recruit iron-mongers, vine-tenders, and glassblowers for the New World. The records of the Virginia Company tell a story of immigration on a larger scale than ever

before: more than 1,000 settlers in 1619, Sandys's first year, and equal numbers in the following three years. Historians who do a little searching and counting in company records will find that some 3,570 settlers were sent to join a population that stood, at the beginning of Sandys's program, around 700.

It would have been an impressive record, except that in 1622, three years later, the colony's population still totaled only about 700 people.

The figures are in the records; you can check the math yourself. What it amounts to is that in 1622, there are about 3,500 Virginians missing. No significant number returned to England; most, after all, could hardly afford passage over, let alone back. No significant number migrated to other colonies. We can account for the deaths of 347 colonists, slain in an Indian attack of 1622. But that leaves more than 3,000 settlers. There seems to be only one way to do the accounting: those immigrants died.

Who—or what—was responsible for the deaths of 3,000 Virginians? Something had gone terribly wrong with Sandys's plans. The magnitude of the failure was so great that the leaders of the company did not care to announce it openly. When the king got word of it, only after the company had virtually bankrupted itself in 1624, he revoked its charter. The historian who confronts the statistical outlines of this horror is forced to ask a few questions. Just what conditions would produce a death rate in the neighborhood of 75 to 80 percent? A figure that high is simply staggering. For comparison, the death rate during the first (and worst) year at the Pilgrims' Plymouth colony stayed a little below 50 percent, and during the severe plague epidemics that swept Britain in the fourteenth century, the death rate probably ranged from 20 to 45 or 50 percent.

Obvious answers suggest themselves. The colony could not sustain such an influx of new settlers, especially since Sandys, in his eagerness to increase the population, sent so many people unprepared. Immigrants often arrived with little or no food to tide them over until they could begin raising their own crops. Housing was inadequate; indeed, the records are full of letters from the company in London begging the colony's governors to build temporary "guest houses" for the newcomers, while the governors' letters in return begged the company to send more adequate provisions with their recruits.

Disease took its toll. Colonists had discovered early on that Virginia was an unhealthy place to live. For newcomers, the first summer proved particularly deadly, so much so that it was called the "seasoning time." Those who survived the first summer significantly raised their chances of prospering. But dangers remained year-round, especially for those weakened by the voyage or living on a poor diet. Contaminated wells most likely contributed to outbreaks of typhoid fever, and malaria claimed additional victims.

The obvious answers do much to explain the devastating death rate, but anomalies remain. Even granting the seriousness of typhoid and other diseases, why a death rate higher than the worst plague years? Virginia's population was made up of younger men primarily and lacked the older men and

women who would have been most weakened by these conditions. Even healthy settlers, of course, may be affected by malnutrition and semistarvation, but that brings the problem right back to the question of why, after more than ten years, the Jamestown colony was not yet self-sufficient.

Self-sufficiency required that colonists raise their own food. And the principal food raised in the area was corn. So the historian asks a simple question: how much work did it take to grow corn? A quick look at the records confirms what might be suspected—that no Virginian in those first years bothered to leave behind a treatise on agriculture. But a closer search of letters and company records provides bits of data here and there. The Indians, Virginians discovered, spent only a few days out of the year tending corn, and they often produced surpluses that they traded to the Virginians. A minister in the colony reported that “in the idle hours of one week,” he and three other men had planted enough corn to last for four months. Other estimates suggested that forty-eight hours’ work would suffice to plant enough corn to last a whole year. Even allowing for exaggeration, it seems clear that comparatively little effort was needed to grow corn.

Yet if corn could be grown easily, and if it was needed to keep the colonists alive, what possible sense is the historian to make of the document we encountered earlier, Governor Argall’s proclamation of 1618 requiring “Every man to sett two acres corn (Except Tradesmen following their trades).” That year is not the last time the law appears on the books. It was reentered in the 1620s and periodically up through the 1650s.

The situation is a puzzle: a law *requiring* Virginians to plant corn? The colony was continually running out of corn, people were starving, and planting and reaping took only a few weeks out of the year. Under these circumstances, the government had to *order* settlers to plant corn?

Yet the conclusion is backed up by other company records. Virginians had to be forced to grow corn. The reason becomes clearer if we reexamine Governor Argall’s gloomy description of Jamestown when he stepped off the boat in 1617. The church is down, the palisades pulled apart, the bridge in pieces, the fresh water spoiled. Everything in the description indicates the colony is decrepit, falling apart, except for one paradoxical feature—the “weeds” in the street. The stockades and buildings may have languished from neglect, but it was not neglect that caused “the market-place and streets, and all other spare places” to be “planted with Tobacco.” Unlike corn, tobacco required a great deal of attention to cultivate. It did not spring up in the streets by accident. Thus Governor Argall’s description indicates that at the same time that settlers were willing to let the colony fall apart, they were energetically planting tobacco in all the “spare places” they could find.

Settlers had discovered as early as 1613 that tobacco was marketable, and they sent small quantities to England the following year. Soon shipments increased dramatically, from 2,500 pounds in 1616 to 18,839 pounds in 1617 and 49,518 pounds in 1618. Some English buyers thought that tobacco could be used as a medicine, but most purchased it simply for the pleasure



Virginia's early planters marketed their tobacco to the Dutch as well as the English. This painting on an early-seventeenth-century ceramic tile shows a Dutch smoker attempting the novel accomplishment of blowing smoke through his nose. The new habit of smoking, at once popular and fairly disreputable, led to a demand for Virginia tobacco in Europe that drove up prices and sent enterprising colonists scrambling for laborers to help raise the profitable crop.

of smoking it. Sandys and many other gentlemen looked upon the "noxious weed" as a vice and did everything to discourage its planting. There had been "often letters from the Counsell" in London, he complained, "sent lately to the Governour for restraint of that immoderate following of Tobacco and to cause the people to apply themselves to other and better commodities." But his entreaties, as well as the corn laws, met with little success. Tobacco was in Virginia to stay.

VIRGINIA BOOM COUNTRY

The Virginia records are full of statistics like the preceding tobacco export figures: number of pounds shipped, price of the "better sort" of tobacco for the year 1619, number of settlers arriving on the *Bona Nova*. These statistics are the sort of box-score evidence, recorded by pedestrian clerks for pedestrian reasons, that we noted earlier. Yet once the historian strips the facts of their pedestrian perspective and uses them for his or her own purposes, they begin to flesh out an astonishing picture of Virginia. Historian Edmund Morgan, in his own reconstruction of the situation, aptly labeled Virginia "the first American boom country."

For Virginia was indeed booming. The commodity in demand—tobacco—was not as glamorous as gold or silver, but the social dynamics operated in similar fashion. The lure of making a fortune created a volatile society where wealth changed hands quickly, where an unbalanced economy centered on one get-rich-quick commodity, and where the values of stability and human dignity counted for little.

The implications of this boom-country society become clearer if we ask the same basic questions about tobacco that we asked about corn. Given the